Thank you for inviting me to come to Brazil again. It is my privilege to join you for this important symposium. 2018 is the 70th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights and I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on the importance of human rights at this critical moment in the history of human rights and global morality.

The title of my paper ‘Happy 70th Birthday Human Rights – Will You Survive The 21st Century?’ may be surprising. A few years ago, such a question would have certainly been ridiculous. It used to be impossible to imagine democratically elected world leaders rejecting human rights. However, the events of the past few years have caused shockwaves. It is no longer crazy to ask if human rights is fit to be the glue that binds together the world’s laws, politics and morality. In the past three years, we have witnessed the rise of populism and me-first politics around the world. Nations may want human rights for themselves and their friends but there is declining concern for minorities and foreigners.

Some of this reaction is very understandable. The New York Times reported, at the end of April 2018, on the number of Venezuelans moving into northern Brazil. At first, the report stated, the residents of Boa Vista responded with soup kitchens and collecting clothes for the new arrivals. But now, 50,000 migrants have arrived and the residents are feeling overwhelmed.

Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, warned in their 2017 annual report that the rise of populism ‘threatens to reverse the accomplishments of the modern human rights movement’. In its 2017-2018 report, Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International said:

As we enter 2018, the year in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights turns 70, it is abundantly clear that none of us can take any of our human rights for granted. We certainly cannot take for granted that we will be free to gather together in protest or to criticise our governments. Neither can we take for granted that social security will be available when we are old or incapacitated; that our babies can grow up in cities with clean, breathable air; or that as young people we will leave school to find jobs that enable us to buy a home.

What is causing voters in many countries to turn to popularist politicians? The answer is complex but, I suspect, as people get poorer they lose hope that they can have a better future so they vote for politicians who promise

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1 NB: Popularism is defined as any political doctrine chosen to appeal to the majority of the electorate. Populism is a different word with a different definition.
2 https://nyti.ms/2KkJSpb
to protect them. We are living at a time in world history where ‘increasingly interconnected global economic and social systems relentlessly and ruthlessly are creating truly obscene levels of riches, privilege and power for a tiny minority of mostly men. At the same time the income most people need to survive has stagnated or dramatically declined for decades.’ There appears to be no solutions on the horizon. The rich get richer and the poor stay the same or even get poorer. People are struggling and suffering. They are desperate for solutions. Seventy years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the undelivered promises of human rights are making people cynical. As one Zambian said to me: ‘You cannot eat rights!’

I am grateful for the opportunity to present four papers at this symposium. I hope that we will be able to identify ways forward to confront this crisis. This evening, I will set out the challenges facing human rights and some of the possible solutions. Tomorrow morning I will argue that human rights needs religion for its survival. On Saturday, I will reflect on how we all can contribute to human rights through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030. On Sunday, I will conclude this series of papers by reflecting on the prayer of Jesus, ‘Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven’.

Let us start by looking back to the world, 70 years ago, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was agreed by the nations of the world.

1. **The background to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

On December 10 1948, in Paris, France, of the 58 members of the United Nations, 48 voted for the UDHR. No country voted against it, eight abstained, and two did not vote. Brazil was one of the 48 countries who voted in favour. This is an example of how the world has changed in 70 years – 58 countries belonged to the UN in 1948. Today there are 193 countries. Global politics is much more complicated!

Back in 1948, World War Two had just ended. In the first half of the 20th century, people endured two world wars. They had just experienced the horror of genocide when six million Jews died in the holocaust. There was a strong desire for a new world order. The world was fractured and unstable. The iron curtain had just separated the world into eastern and western blocks. Colonialism was collapsing. Agreeing the UDHR was a colossal task. There were only nine key people on drafting committee. One was a woman – Eleanor Roosevelt former first lady of the USA. There were no Africans or South Asians drafting the text and only one South American – a Chilean, Hernan Santa Cruz.

The drafters based the declaration on the concepts of natural law and natural rights. In other words, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was based on logic and rationality. In doing so, they were building on the philosophical tradition of, among others, Aristotle (Greek), Cicero (Roman), and Thomas Aquinas (the medieval Catholic natural law tradition). Philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbs and Francisco Suarez developed the concepts of natural law and natural rights further during the European Enlightenment. These ideas featured prominently in the American Revolution and the French Revolution. The central idea underpinning natural law and natural rights is that all people are equal and therefore have certain rights to ensure everyone has justice.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stands upon these foundations. It contains 30 articles. Many are well known to us today. For example:

**Article 1**: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

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Article 2: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

I recommend you make time to read the declaration in full.

2. Human Rights have been embraced by many in the past 70 years

The UDHR has proved to be very popular. It has been widely used and endorsed. In 1993, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali claimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has become ‘a common standard of achievement for all people and all nations’.6

Many parts of the Christian Church, have aligned with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1968, the United Nations designated it ‘International Human Rights Year’. The Salvation Army marked the 20th anniversary by printing a book called ‘The Salvation Army and Human Rights’. The then international leader, General Coutts wrote:

In Human Rights Year, Salvationists are identified with the high ideals of social justice and acceptance as the unchallenged right of every man as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights17.

Pope John Paul II, when he addressed the United Nations General Assembly in October 1979 defined the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as ‘a true milestone on the path of humanity's moral progress’.8

Professor Linda Hogan, in her recent book, ‘Keeping Faith In Human Rights’, says that ‘in the world of Christian social engagement, the language of human rights has become the lingua franca of political action’.9 A clear example of this embrace of the UDHR within The Salvation Army is a book by an Australian officer, Major Troy Pittaway. He writes:

As Christians and as a Church, we should embrace the UDHR and the concept of human rights, revelling in the truth contained in the declaration ... Through the UDHR, a paradigm has been developed to allow Christians to stand against the world’s domination systems, and do it hand in hand with those who do not have the same faith as us but nonetheless care for humanity as deeply as we do.10

The embracing of human rights by people of religious faith is controversial. Major Pittaway correctly notes the Judaeo-Christian foundations were used to develop the UDHR in the late 1940s. However, these foundations have been eroded in the past 70 years. Human rights discourse is now viewed by some of its critics as ‘nothing more than individualism, secularism, and Western political imperialism in disguise’.11 Professor Upendra Baxi, an Indian legal scholar and author of ‘The Future of Human Rights’ critiques the embrace of human rights by Christians. He argues each time: ‘Christians adopt one of the internationalized languages of modernity, they

7 The Salvation Army and Human Rights, 1968.
8 CSDP, 76
9 Hogan, 2016, 1.
contribute to the social marginalization of their own narrative tradition’. In other words, the words and concepts used in human rights language do not strengthen Christianity. In fact, human rights language has replaced and marginalised Christian theology.

3. **What is included in ‘human rights’?**

One of the reasons for a crisis of confidence in human rights is the problem of defining ‘human rights’? We can no longer simply point to the 30 articles in the UDHR as the definition of human rights. In the past 70 years, human rights has developed into a multi-faceted, comprehensive way of thinking and living. The United Nations has agreed new treaties that have defined and constantly redefine the boundaries of human rights. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were signed in 1966. These two covenants, based on the rights contained in the UDHR, are binding on all states who signed the treaty. Since then many new treaties - human rights instruments – have extended the meaning of human rights and the scope of human rights law.

National courts as well as by other legal bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights, are continually adding to and redefining the scope of human rights. NGOs and advocacy groups are also constantly trying to widen the definition of human rights. For example, Amnesty International’s 2015 campaign that sex work should be completely decriminalised as a matter of human rights was very controversial.

Human rights is no longer a political or legal instrument. Human rights has become a creed by which people live their lives. Promoting human rights is their life’s purpose. Their passion for human rights is often greater than that of some Christians! So when I am asked if I support human rights, I pause and politely ask: ‘What do you mean by human rights’?

4. **Growing doubts about human rights**

This problem of defining human rights is part of a bigger crisis facing global society. The big question for the 21st century is ‘Do we need truth?’ The Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year in 2016 was ‘post truth’. The ‘post truth’ movement is eroding trust in objective truth – such as the Bible as the Word of God. Post truth is the fruit of decades of individualism. If I feel something is true, it is true. I can create truth. Post truth flourishes in the vacuum created by atheism. If there is no God, why should there be an external definition of truth. It logically flows that individuals who are autonomous and rational should define their own truth. Who has the right to determine what is true? Me and me alone. This is our new world. Post truth. Post God. Post Human Rights. Casey Williams writing in *The New York Times* in April 2017 argued:

Call it what you want: relativism, constructivism, deconstruction, postmodernism, critique. The idea is the same: Truth is not found, but made, and making truth means exercising power.  

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12 Source: Hogan, 2016, 2.
The result of the post-truth movement is that those with power decide what is true. It does not matter if lies are told. It is not important that facts do not support the lies – what matters is whether a majority feel it is true. In our social media world where we are bombarded by ‘facts’ people are inclined to rely more on gut feeling than rational evidence.

I have seen many examples of this while living in the USA for the past three years. Perhaps you heard about the controversy over the number of people who attended the inauguration of President Trump. Pictures clearly showed that more people attended President Obama’s inauguration but President Trump and his spokespeople refuse to accept it. They talk of ‘alternative facts’. Please do not think this is only an issue for the people of the USA. This trend of emotions determining what is true, is infecting minds and hearts around the world. Politicians campaigning for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union told voters to ignore the expert opinion and go with their hearts. The global balance of power has tilted away from governments committed to human rights norms and toward those indifferent or actively hostile to them. Those countries, who most obviously ignore human rights, include China, Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, and Venezuela.17

Regrettably, the governments who signed the UDHR have failed to live up to their promises. Too often human rights violations by allies are ignored, while the weaker countries – with few powerful allies – are criticised. For example, nine of the ten cases of the International Criminal Court since it was launched involved former African leaders. 18 This sense of unfairness has resulted in many African countries – including South Africa – threatening to withdraw from the ICC.

Unfortunately, the human rights movement has been unwilling to accept some of the blame for the greatly weakened position of human rights. Human rights believers are very passionate. They believe they are on the ‘right side of history’ so their victory is inevitable. This is a risky and dangerous assumption. Canadian politician, Michael Ignatieff, warned in his 2001 book, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*: ‘In the next fifty years, we can expect to see the moral consensus that sustained the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights] in 1948 splintering still further … There is no reason to believe that economic globalization entails moral globalization.’19

Frustration is growing in the human rights community. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights since September 2014, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has just announced he is not going to seek a second term because he fears having ‘to bend a knee in supplication’ to powerful countries at the UN who do not support human rights. 20 He is walking away.

5. **What can be done?**

Having spent most of this evening making you depressed, I want to promise you that this symposium will be encouraging! We cannot give up on human rights. There is a way forward but it will need serious commitment and a willingness to change.

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19 Ibid.

First, we need to persuade people who are defenders of liberal, secular human rights that they need partners who are not secular liberals. They need to recognise that human rights is not 70 years old. It is not the gift of western secular, liberal, atheists to the rest of the world. The UDHR was built on thousands of years of human experience – and divine revelation. There are still some passionate secularists in positions of influence in the UN, western governments and secular NGOs, who are not willing to work with people of faith. They think they have evolved further than we backward types who still have faith in God. Their mission is convert everyone to their new secular religion that they call ‘human rights’.

The solution is not to replace secular liberalism with Christianity. While I personally believe that Jesus Christ is the truth, the life and the way to live well, the world is too fractured and fallen for everyone to believe in one truth. Rather, as Theology Professor Linda Hogan proposes: We need ‘an understanding of human rights that is not grounded in the universalist philosophy of liberalism but rather is built within a context of tradition-thick, cross-cultural, multi-religious conversations and is secured through emancipatory politics’.  

In other words, people of different faiths, religions and worldviews – including the secularists – in every part of the world need to build a rich, comprehensive understanding of human rights through deep listening and genuine conversation. No one should be forced to accept the other person’s faith or worldview – rather, we build respectful relationships despite our differences by working together to address an issue of common concern. Professor Hogan argues ‘Human rights politics is best understood as a deliberative process through which we articulate a set of moral expectations to which we can be held to account’. There already many good examples of this approach. There are many UN agencies and some governments willing to engage with people of faith. I was at a meeting a few weeks ago in New York where most of the UN agencies came to listen and converse with FBOs and religious leaders. Those in the room have very different theologies and philosophies but share a common passion to work together to serve poor and marginalised people around the world.

This brings me to the second urgent change. People of faith need to clearly, publically explain why we support the UDHR and why it is worth defending.Too often people of faith stay silent when human rights abuses are occurring. The Salvation Army has to make some confessions in this respect. We should admit we have not taken time to educate our people on human rights. In my experience, when Salvationists promote human rights, they simply parrot a secular, liberal, individualistic version of human rights. This is not good enough. Christians should actively support the UDHR because it echoes Biblical principles and Christian theology. This places a duty on those of us who have a faith – whether we are Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikhs, etc – to know and understand our own faith narrative and theology. To do this, we must be clear and confident about the truth claims we make and be able to explain the relevance of our faith in light of the real life experience of those we claim to serve.

The third essential change necessary for the success of a new form of human rights politics depends on people of different faiths affirming a shared belief in the dignity of human beings. This is a ‘common ground’

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21 Hogan, 2016, 5-6.
22 Ibid, 5.
23 A good example of Muslims doing this work is ‘The Marrakesh Declaration’ on the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim majority communities, 2016 http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/
24 Ibid, 117.
There are many different ways people justify the inherent dignity of humanity. This is ok. We can still work together to address issues of common concerns.\textsuperscript{25}

Finally, we must avoid falling into the trap of over-stating the capacity of people to save themselves. Richard Rorty, an influential American philosopher made this mistake when he wrote: ‘If we work together we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming’.\textsuperscript{26} Christians have a problem with this. While God has given humanity great capacities and abilities, we can never be our own saviour.

The good news is that good progress is being made with governments, UN agencies and Faith Based organisations working together.\textsuperscript{27} While there are still some in the UN system and western governments who cannot see the point of working with people of faith, there are many others who are stretching out a hand of friendship and welcoming people of different faiths. I will talk more about this tomorrow.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In closing, let me summarise the main points:

First, we live in a post-truth world where popularist, me-first politicians are winning elections caused, to large extent, by the growing inequalities in the world and the desperation of poor people for solutions. As a result, the future of human rights is not secure.

Second, the perception that secular, western, liberal, atheists are the owners of human rights is unhelpful to the cause of building a better world. Human rights was not born 70 years ago. The belief in the unique and equal value of all human life is present in most of the world religions. There is room for diversity at the human rights table.

Third, people of faith need to embrace the opportunity to build a better world by partnering with the defenders of human rights. This is a partnership. We cannot leave our beliefs at the door but, rather, we respect difference and commit to building a better, fairer, more just world.

Thank you.

\textbf{References}


\textsuperscript{25} Pallant, Dean. ‘Keeping Faith in Faith Based Organizations’, Wipf & Stock, 2012.


\textsuperscript{27} For example, the International Partnership for Religion and Development \url{http://www.partner-religion-development.org/}